

# The String

## THAT TIED US TOGETHER

**G**enerally, Jews are known as an intelligent bunch. For our population, for example, there's a disproportionately large number of Nobel Prize winners. Yet, one group of Jews seemingly gets the short end of the stick when it comes to smarts, and that is the villagers in the town of Chelm. Jewish folklore uses their cleverness to impart lessons. There is a lesson that has always eluded me from the following story.

**A Jew from Chelm** went to the *Mikvah* (ritual bath) before praying. When unclothed, he worried that he would not be able to tell himself apart from everyone else. He wouldn't be able to remember or recognize who he is. Talk about an identity crisis! He came up with a solution. He decided to tie a red string around his big toe to distinguish himself from everyone else.

**Thanks to the slippery suds**, the man's string loosened and stuck to the toe of another person. The man who devised the plan asked the person who now wore the string, "I know who you are, but who am I?"

**It's a weird story**, no? I still don't understand it completely, but I think an experience I had this past summer brought me closer to the lesson. In June, for the first time in my life, I attended a program named "Tiferes" in Morristown, New Jersey. I wasn't exactly the poster child for a Yeshiva student as a 39-year-old family man.

**My notion of identity** in yeshiva was challenged on several fronts. (No, I did not wear a string on my big toe.) I was twice the age of most students, and these students became my teachers. How would I fit-in with students and teachers in their late teens and early 20s? Would I be able to see myself in, or relate to, other students? Would our connection be as flimsy as a string?

**And just who are these students?** Most (if not all) students enrolled in the program are what's referred to as "*baalei teshuva*," individuals who came to religious observance later in life. That's not at all what they appeared,

at least not to me. They had beards and dressed in a manner typical of observant individuals. Even more, their knowledge of Jewish texts and commitment to Jewish observance was beyond impressive. On one level, I knew they're *baalei teshuva*, but on another level it was hard for me to believe.

**In college**, I was a study-aholic. I'd isolate myself in a study carousel in the library and sometimes even wear earplugs to study. Further, I come from a public school background, both growing up as a student and in my current profession as a teacher. In public school, students go from class to class in designated classrooms throughout a building. In Yeshiva, the program I was in, students converse and learn primarily in one main study hall. Two students sit across from each other and learn, while a separate pair similarly studies at the same table. Would I be able to concentrate? How can anyone learn in this type of set-up? Would the noise drive me to the end of my rope?

**And who am I** supposed to become? What would my friends at synagogue expect of me upon my return? Should I come back with a black hat? I'd come back to my wife and son as the same person, wouldn't I? Or should I?





**Oy.** The fellow from Chelm had it easy. So how was my Yeshiva experience? At first it was jarring, like any new environment. After a few days, I settled in. I clicked with other students who became good friends, despite our differences in age. They helped my mission in Yeshiva, and I hope that in some way I helped them, too. I was able to generally focus on what I studied (although not always). My best teachers were half my age. Far from being a hit on my ego, I found their youthful energy and humor enlightening.

**The twists and turns** of the Yeshiva experience enabled me to progress in ways that otherwise might have laid dormant. Like a Mikvah that envelops a person, so too did my ten-day Yeshiva experience. And I hope that I came out better on the other side. I don't consider myself a full-fledged Yeshiva student and probably never will, but I can identify with those who are and can try emulating their exemplary qualities.

**Of course it's important** to retain one's core identity. My core is strong enough that I don't need a string to remember: I am a Jew, a husband a father, etc. Just maybe, though, the string in Chelm's Mikvah represents being tied to the same notions of who one is supposed to be. It represses growth. Just like a seed has to decompose

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before it can grow, perhaps a lesson from Chelm is that the string has to be dislodged in order to make progress.

**In another sense**, the string that attaches to someone else can be the bond. Maybe the fellow from Chelm was partly right; we are very much the same, despite age, background or location. There's one string that binds us together and ties us to the same mission: G-d, Torah and love of a fellow Jew.

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